

# Basic Information about Thai Element Theory

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In ancient civilizations all around the world, traditional medicine is based on the concept that all things are composed of earth, water, fire, wind and space. This includes everything; dirt, metal, bones, dreams, thoughts and desires. Not only are flesh and blood made of elements, but also human character, tendencies and disposition toward certain conditions and diseases. It is the balance and imbalance of the elements within us and around us that affects our emotional and physical well being.

In Thailand, element theory is a unifying factor for the five branches of traditional Thai medicine. These branches are internal medicine (*paetayasaht*: treatment of the internal body); external medicine (*kayapahpbambat*: bone setting, external application of herbs, Thai massage, etc.); spirit medicine (*saiyasaht*: shamanistic healing with spirits, incantations, magical tattooing, amulets, etc.); divinatory sciences (*horasaht*: numerology, astrology and palmistry used to determine elemental and disease predisposition); and Buddhism (*putthayasaht*) which may be viewed as the mental health branch of Thai medicine.

Branches of Traditional Thai Medicine		
Internal Medicine	<i>Paetayasaht</i>	Herbs, diet, treatment of internal body
External Medicine	<i>Kayapahpbambat</i>	Massage, bone setting, external application of herbs etc.
Spirit Medicine	<i>Saiyasaht</i>	Healing with spirits, incantations, mantras, objects, shamanistic
Divinatory Medicine	<i>Horasaht</i>	Using systems such as astrology, numerology, palmistry etc. to determine medical predisposition and remedial measures
Buddhism	<i>Putthayasaht</i>	Bringing about cessation of suffering through study and practice of the Buddhist dharma

The elements are easiest to understand outside of ourselves, as they exist in nature. A boulder is primarily earth element, a lake is primarily water element, a fire in the forest is primarily fire element, and the movement of wind through the tall grass is primarily wind element. In our bodies, earth and water make up our flesh and blood (anatomy), and fire and wind are the forces that bring us to life (physiology). Earth is the container, water is the fluidity, fire is the heat, and wind is all movement. All things contain all elements in varying amounts. To better understand the elements as they manifest in our individual bodies, let's take a closer look at each element.

## **Earth (*din*)**

Earth element has the qualities of being hard, stable and heavy. It provides resistance and support, and an experience of solidity. These attributes are important to understand when we deal with element theory.

One role of *din* is to be a container or vessel for water, fire and wind. Imagine a slowly-moving, warm jungle river. The riverbed and riverbanks form the container, and they are made primarily of earth element. The river itself is primarily made of water element. The warmth of the river comes from fire element, and the movement of the river is wind.

Earth element dominates physical structures such as buildings, tree trunks, coconut shells and mountains. It provides a structure within which other elements may interact. In our bodies it is the structure (but not the movement) of bones, skin, nails, teeth and organs. Earth supports us, grounds us and protects us, and it provides defined shape. On a cellular level, our bodies have the same elemental interplay as a river. The cell walls are earth, the fluid within the cells is water, the temperature of the cells is fire, and the movement within is wind. This interplay of elements is constant, and it is everywhere. Because earth element is the heaviest element, it is the slowest one to change and it is often the last one to be affected.

## **Water (*naam*)**

The primary qualities of *naam* are that it is moist, fluid and soft. It provides cohesion and fluidity. Water element dominates all fluids, from tree sap to motor oil, from dew to oceans, from tears to blood. Water provides lubrication, and it is the glue that holds all things together. If you put two drops of water together, they join together to form one drop. Even a boulder, which by its nature is primarily earth element, contains water that holds it together. Without the water, the boulder would be dust.

To consider the element of water, it is helpful to think of still water such as puddles, baths and ponds, because rivers and oceans also contain a large amount of wind element. Water is the second heaviest element, and therefore, like earth, it is also slow to change.

## **Fire (*fai*)**

The primary qualities of *fai* are that it is bright, reactive and sharp. It provides transformation and ripening, and also brings an warming experience. Fire heats our bodies, breaks down our food, encourages transformation, and is the impetus for change. Fire's primary role in the body is the digestion of food. Just as the flames in an active fireplace burn paper and wood, the element of fire in our digestive system transforms food into absorbable nutrients. Fire is much lighter than earth or water, and it changes easily.

## **Wind (*lom*)**

The primary qualities of wind are lightness, mobility and dryness. The function of wind is to provide growth and vibration, and it has the experience of movement. Wind should not be equated to air, which can be static. Wind is inherently representative of motion. The secondary qualities of wind are cool, light, rough, subtle and non-slimy. Like fire, *lom* is more of a metabolic force than a physical structure such as earth or water. Wind is movement. The slow upward growth of a tree; the rapid movement of a ball being kicked; the flowing of blood in our circulatory

system; the rotation of the earth on its axis; the transfer of electricity between a wall socket and a lamp; and the energy of thoughts swirling in our minds. In Thai element theory, all of these motions are considered as wind. Although fire is the impetus for movement, wind is the very movement itself. As one of the lightest elements, wind is often the first element to be affected by most circumstances. It changes easily and often.

### **Space (*aagaasathaat*) and consciousness (*winyaanathaat*)**

If earth is the container in which water, fire and wind interact, then space is the canvas upon which they all exist. Space has the qualities of being expansive and subtle. It provides non-resistance, and it creates a field of activity in which the other elements can exist. The experience of space is openness. In recent times, quantum physics has shown us what the ancient people already knew, that there is more space than there is matter. It is the lightest and most pervasive of all the elements.

In traditional medicine systems, space is often linked to consciousness, and in Thai medicine, knowledge of the element of space includes study of the Buddha's teachings of form, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness. For a Thai massage therapist, working with space involves the experience of sinking into the receiver's body.

### **Elemental constitution (*thaat jao reuan*) and imbalance of the elements**

In the first five or six years of human life, our *thaat jao reuan*, or core elemental constitution, is established. During this process, individuals are weighted more toward one specific element. If, for example, you have a predominance of water element, your *thaat jao reuan* is water. As a water element person, you will have certain physical and mental characteristics, as well as certain predispositions to disease. Some people have more than one element in almost equal amounts. In this case, their *thaat jao reuan* is a mixture of elements. Earth element is seldom a part of a person's core elemental constitution.

**Earth *thaat jao reuan*** - Earth element is not often found as part of a core elemental constitution. When it is found, it is often paired with another of the elements.

Earth-dominant people have a large skeleton and bone structure, large eyes, a square-shaped figure, a deep resonant voice, thick hair and strong fingernails. Characteristics are loyalty, being grounded, slowness to change, and a compassionate and balanced nature.

### **Water *thaat jao reuan***

Water people may have a large frame, thick hair and eyelashes, large "sweet" eyes, a fleshy body, well-hydrated skin and a soft melodious voice. They can be intuitive, compassionate, emotional, malleable (they easily follow other people's lead), and slow to change. They are frequently the "glue" that holds a relationship or a family together (water is cohesive) and they tend to enjoy sleep, sweets and less active lifestyles. They learn at a slower pace, but they learn thoroughly, and with long-lasting retention. They can tend toward depression and fear-based anxiety.

## **Fire thaat jao reuan**

Fire people can have a medium-sized physique, a strong athletic body, and reddish coloring (red hair almost always indicates fire element). They often have soft hair that grays early, oily skin, and sharp clear eyes. Their eyes are often the first thing you notice about them. They are usually intellectual and communicate well. They often become teachers, politicians, or assume roles that require public speaking. Fire people are motivated and follow through on their goals. They tend to be passionate and accomplished. Fire also manifests in a disposition that can easily be brought to anger, and fiery people can sometimes overpower those around them - with or without the intention to do so - as they accomplish their goals.

## **Wind thaat jao reuan**

Wind-dominant people can be either tall or short, but they usually have a thin skeletal frame. They often have dark coloring, small eyes, and dry skin. Like fiery people, windy people have a sharp intelligence. They tend to be creative, and often excel at mathematics and at work that requires calculation. Wind-dominant people often have a lot of ideas, but since the nature of wind implies movement, they often begin projects without finishing them. They are inclined to speak circuitously, and can stray from their subject of focus.

## **Imbalance**

Elements exist in six states: balanced, excited, weakened, deranged (disturbed), broken and gone (lost). When an element is deranged, it fluctuates between excited and weakened. A broken element implies a serious condition, with life in danger, and when an element is gone, the person is dying or already dead..

When elements go out of balance, they can cause or intensify human conditions, disorders and disease on physical and emotional levels. Earth element doesn't go out of balance very easily, but water, fire and wind are much more susceptible to change. Learning how to identify element balance, and then treating a patient based on that individual's thaat jao reuan, is the way that serious and dedicated healers work within the field of traditional Thai medicine. This type of practice requires long periods of study and dedication, and training must be obtained by a traditional Thai doctor, or someone who has studied this work extensively.

## **Thai bodywork for balancing the elements**

In traditional Thai medicine, elements exist in six states: balanced, excited, weakened, disturbed, broken and lost. When an element is disturbed, it fluctuates between excited and weakened. A broken element implies a serious condition, with life in danger, and when an element is lost, the person is dying or already dead.

For the most part, elemental imbalances are corrected through dietary change, lifestyle modifications and internal herbal medicine, however bodywork can and should be used to complement and support these changes. Thai medicine is a holistic system, and external therapies support internal healing, and vice versa. When using bodywork to treat elemental imbalances, Thai therapists should only attempt therapies in which they have been adequately trained. Elemental balance is encouraged by specific techniques, adjusted speed and rhythm, and sometimes by using tools such as balms and liniments.

Thai Massage for Elements	
Water	Stretching • Twisting • Cupping • Dry heat therapies • Warming balms and liniments • Faster rhythm • Work towards the core • Use care with pressure
Fire	Moderate rhythm • Deep sen work • Plucking • Compression • Cooling balms and liniments • Cupping and scraping • Work away from the core
Wind	Calm rhythm • Balanced work • Sequence work • Traction • Use warming oils •

## Summary

Be wary of anyone who teaches Thai massage based on Chinese or Indian Ayurvedic concepts. Traditional Thai massage belongs to traditional Thai medicine, and it is not complete without the use of Thai medicine theory. If Thai element theory, sen line theory, acupressure theory and other Thai therapies guide your bodywork choices, then you are working within the Thai tradition. Sometimes an appropriate treatment doesn't appear like the Thai massage that is taught to most westerners. It is entirely possible, for example, to apply Thai medicine theory to rub a person's body with sesame oil, or to avoid performing stretches, or to work on some areas of the body and not on other areas.

This essay is meant to be a doorway into the elemental theory of traditional Thai medicine. Unfortunately, most people who learn Thai massage are not taught theory. It is difficult for westerners to find teachers and schools that can properly explain Thai medicine theory, but excellent teachers do certainly exist, and all who are interested should seek out this type of training.

*Essay information written by Nephyr Jacobsen, RTT. Edited and prepared for Thai massage students by Bob Haddad, RTT. A more detailed version of this essay first appeared in the book "Thai Massage & Thai Healing Arts: Practice, Culture & Spirituality." © 2013 Bob Haddad. Please do not reprint or reproduce without direct written permission of the authors.*